

ANGER

Anger is a strong feeling of displeasure or hostility, often issuing in action against the person who arouses it.

A. Words for Anger.

The Hebrew word most often translated “anger” is *’ap* (e.g., Gen 27:45). The dual of this word denotes the nostrils, which may suggest that *’ap* implies the snort that can accompany anger. Among other words translated “anger,” *hemah* (e.g., 2 Sam 11:20) suggests the furious heat of anger; it is also translated “fury,” “rage,” and “heat.” *harah* suggests something that blazes (*harah*; e.g., Gen 4:6); it is also translated “fury” and “heat.” *’ebrah* suggests something that bursts out and overwhelms (*’abar*; e.g., Job 40:11); it, too, can be translated “fury.” The word for wind or spirit, *ruah*, is sometimes translated “anger” (Judg 8:3). *ka’as* (e.g., Qoh 7:9) suggests vexation, a strong feeling that can be mixed up with frustration and grief (the same word in Qoh 1:18). *qesep* often suggests a stronger feeling of wrath (e.g., Est 1:18). *za’ap* suggests the raging of a storm (e.g., 2 Chr 16:10). *za’am* is usually reckoned to mean “indignation” (e.g., Jer 15:17). The most common NT word is *thumos* (e.g., Heb 11:27), which can also suggest passion or courage, and thus points to the strength of feelings involved in anger. *orge* (e.g., Jas 1:19) perhaps suggests an even stronger feeling—it is more often translated “wrath.”

B. The Dynamics of Anger.

Biblical allusions to anger often refer to it simply as an aspect of being human, without necessarily suggesting a moral or theological judgment on it. It is part of a biblical understanding of humanity that by nature we get angry, as it is part of a biblical understanding that by nature we feel compassion or hatred or desire.

Anger is thus a natural response on the part of people who feel wronged. So Esau gets angry when Jacob swindles him (Gen 27:44-45), as does Jacob when Rachel treats him as responsible for her not having children (Gen 30:1-2), and Laban when he feels slighted (Gen 31:35). After his bride betrays his riddle, Samson goes home to his parents in hot anger (Judg 14:28)—he has been made a fool of. Saul gets angry because of people’s enthusiasm for David (1 Sam 18:8) and because of Jonathan’s attitude to David (1 Sam 20:30). Abner gets angry at Ish-bosheth’s implicit accusation of him (2 Sam 3:8). Naaman gets angry because he feels slighted (2 Kgs 5:11). Asa gets angry when challenged by a seer, as does Uzziah when challenged by the priests (2 Chr 16:10; 26:19). A man gets angry when his father has mercy on his brother in a way that seems unfair (Luke 15:28).

Thus anger is a response to a sense that one has been personally devalued or slighted. One's human worth has been placed in question. A backbiting tongue therefore generates anger (Prov 25:23). So does jealousy—because it issues out of rejection, with its associated slight and shame (Prov 6:34). Paradoxically, it is possible to be angry with oneself (Gen 45:5)—because one has slighted oneself or dishonored oneself by one's action.

Loss of self-esteem is not the only reason for anger. Sanballat and others get angry at Nehemiah's wall-building (Neh 4:1, 7 [3:33; 4:1]): they are frustrated at the prospect of loss of power. The wicked get angry when faithful people do well (Ps 112:10).

Anger is also a natural response to the wronging of someone with whom we identify. Jacob's sons are very angry when Shechem rapes their sister (Gen 34:7; compare 49:5-7), as is Potiphar when he believes Joseph has attempted to seduce his wife (Gen 39:19). Jonathan gets angry because of his father's hostility to David, and thus to him (1 Sam 20:34). Of course in these instances, our identifying with the person who has directly been wronged means our own esteem has again been imperiled.

This throws into relief the more selfless nature of the anger that arises on other occasions. Moses' anger burns hot when he sees the gold calf and the Israelites dancing (Exod 32:19); this seems to be an anger expressing concern for Yahweh's honor. The mayor of Shechem is angry at a plot to unseat Abimelech as king (Judg 9:30). Nahash the Ammonite's threat to maim and disgrace the people of Jabesh-gilead arouses furious anger in Saul (1 Sam 11:6). Elisha gets angry with the king when he falls short in what he implicitly asks of God (2 Kgs 13:19). Is it a misplaced "righteous anger" when people get angry with Jesus for healing on the Sabbath (John 7:23)?

In light of the serious significance that can thus attach to anger, some humor or irony appears on other occasions when someone gets angry. Balaam gets angry when his donkey will not move (Num 22:27), and his employer gets angry when Balaam will not curse Israel (Num 24:10). Eliab gets angry because he reckons his brother is getting above his station (1 Sam 17:28). Ahasuerus gets angry because Vashti refuses to parade at his banquet (Est 1:12). Elihu gets angry at Job because he justifies himself, and at his three friends because they do not answer Job adequately (Job 32:2-5). Jonah gets angry when God has mercy on Nineveh, and when God makes his sheltering plant wither (Jonah 4:1-9).

C. The Trouble with Anger.

Of course anger can carry negative consequences. A hot-tempered man stirs up strife, but the person who is slow to anger quietens contention (Prov 15:18). People's anger leads them to cause trouble

to others (Pss 55:3; 124:3). It causes strife and transgression (Prov 29:22; 30:33). It is cruel and overwhelming (Prov 27:4). It issues in devastation and persecution (Isa 14:6; compare Amos 1:11). Thus Yahweh warns Cain that his natural angry response to his rejection means that sin is crouching at the door of his life, ready to pounce, and his anger indeed issues in the murder of Abel (Gen 4:5-8). Anger makes Potiphar put Joseph in prison (Gen 39:19; compare Gen 40:2; 41:10; 2 Chr 16:10). It makes Simeon and Levi overreact in slaughtering the men in Shechem (Gen 49:5-6). It makes Balaam beat his donkey and it makes Barak berate and sack Balaam (Num 22:27; 24:10). It makes Naaman refuse to take the action that will bring healing (2 Kgs 5:11-12). It makes Ahasuerus depose Vashti and hang Haman (Est 1:12; 2:1; 7:10). It makes Job rage at God (according to Bildad, at least; Job 18:4). It makes a householder send a servant to jail (Matt 18:34). It makes Herod kill a whole town's children (Matt 2:16).

The anger of a powerful person is therefore something to be wary of (Gen 44:18; 2 Sam 11:20; compare Dan 2:12; 3:13; Matt 22:7). Fortunately it is often the case that "a soft answer turns away wrath" (Prov 15:1), as Naaman's servants illustrate (2 Kgs 5:11-14). Likewise, when the Ephraimites are angered by not having been summoned to a battle against the Midianites, Gideon is able to placate them with a conciliatory answer (Judg 8:1-3).

Anger can also have terrible consequences for oneself. This is so for Saul, and Gen 49:7 sees the scattering of Simeon and Levi in Israel as a fruit of their angry action. In fact, anger is just stupid (Qoh 7:9).

In the NT it is often therefore simply condemned (Matt 5:22; 2 Cor 12:20; Gal 5:20; Eph 4:31; Col 3:8; 1 Tim 2:8). Do not even get angry at wickedness, a psalm advises, because it leads to wrongdoing (Ps 37:8)—perhaps the idea is that it leads us to join evildoers, or perhaps that it leads us to take action against them wrongly. We are not to associate with angry people, because we may end up like them (Prov 22:24-25).

D. The Value of Anger.

At the same time, passages noted above show how the scriptures recognize the positive significance of anger. It can be an appropriate response to wrongdoing, and a response that provides the energy to take action against wrongdoing. Yahweh points out that if Job had enough overflowing anger he could put down the arrogant and wicked (Job 40:11-12). It is when Yahweh's spirit comes on him that Saul gets very angry at the Ammonites' treatment of the people of Jabesh-Gilead and takes spectacular action on their behalf (1 Sam 11:6-11). Nehemiah gets angry at oppression within the community and takes

decisive action (Neh 5:6). Jesus gets angry at people who do not want him to heal on the sabbath (Mk 3:5). Yahweh stirs up the Philistines' anger against Judah and they invade and pillage Judah, unwittingly implementing Yahweh's will (2 Chr 21:16-17).

An exception proves the rule: David gets angry when he hears about Amnon's rape of Tamar (2 Sam 13:21), but he never does anything about it.

E. Ambiguity in References to Anger.

Perhaps because the scriptures focus on simply recognizing that anger is an aspect of human nature, they often leave its interpretation ambiguous. Moses exits from his last confrontation with Pharaoh "in hot anger" and later gets angry with the Israelites (Exod 11:8; 16:20). Anger makes him hurl away the stones with the Decalogue on them, so as to break them, burn and ground up the calf, throw the powder into water, and make the Israelites drink it (Exod 32:19-20). He gets angry with Eleazar and Ithamar, then with the army officers, for not obeying Yahweh's word (Lev 10:16; Num 31:14), and also with Korah, Dathan, and Abiram for their criticisms of him (Num 16:15). Samuel gets angry when Saul has not properly obeyed Yahweh, so that Yahweh rejects Saul (1 Sam 15:11)—who is Samuel angry with? David gets angry when God kills Uzzah (2 Sam 6:8)—is he angry with God, and is he entitled to be so?

There is a broader such ambiguity. Human anger does not effect God's righteousness (Jas 1:20). Like vengeance, anger is God's business. Assyria may be used as the instrument for expressing God's anger, but it acts to express itself, and it will pay for that (Isa 10:5-15).

F. Controlling Anger.

The scriptures often refer to the importance of being slow to anger. The person who is slow to anger has great understanding, whereas a hasty temper exalts folly (Prov 14:29; compare 19:11; 29:11; Jas 1:19). Although anger has a heat and a force that generates right action, this heat and force can also generate wrong action, or express itself against an object other than one that deserves it (2 Sam 12:5-6). Or it may generate action that goes too far: the community needs to safeguard against the hot anger of the avenger of blood in case he takes action when someone had killed a person accidentally (Deut 19:6). Jacob curses the particularly fierce anger of his sons that led to their slaughtering the men of Shechem (Gen 49:7). And the trouble is that anger takes huge self-control—people who can be slow to anger are as impressive as powerful rulers (Prov 16:32).

Ephesians thus exhorts people to be angry, but not to sin (4:26)—even though it goes on simply to condemn anger (4:31). (The exhortation follows Ps 4:4 LXX, but it is doubtful if the Hebrew there refers to anger.) “Do not let the sun go down on your anger,” it adds (Eph 4:26). This is a little puzzling, as the importance of being slow to anger might imply that letting the sun go down on your anger would give time for reflection, time to cool off. The force of anger does dissipate with time (Gen 27:44-45; Est 2:1; 7:10), and while that may sometimes be for the worse (you may lose the impetus to do the thing that needs doing), it may well be for the better. But presumably Ephesians is exhorting people not to nurse anger when they ought to let it dissipate. It is the godless in heart who cherish anger (Job 36:13).